

## Federal Officials Take Bin Laden Threat against U.S. Pipelines Seriously

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*By Michael Davis, Houston Chronicle, Nov. 27*

The FBI confirmed Monday that it has warned the energy industry that Osama bin Laden may have ordered strikes against U.S. natural gas facilities if he is caught or killed.

The agency issued the warning last week, Attorney General John Ashcroft said at a news conference Monday. It had uncorroborated information that bin Laden may have approved plans for such attacks, Ashcroft added.

The FBI warning said "such an attack would allegedly take place in the event that either bin Laden or Taliban leader Mullah Omar are either captured or killed."

The warning hit home in Houston because while the warning did not single out a target, it referred specifically to natural gas infrastructure, such as pipelines. Houston is the hub of this industry and is at the center of a dense web of gas pipelines.

The warning was considered similar to the one issued earlier about potential attacks against West Coast bridges.

Ashcroft said the government is in regular communication with companies that own the nation's energy infrastructure, such as refineries, natural gas pipelines and nuclear plants.

Federal law enforcement officials received the uncorroborated report of undetermined reliability about a potential attack against natural gas supplies about 10 days ago, Ashcroft said.

Since the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, all energy companies have established more stringent security measures. Pipelines, however, are considered especially vulnerable since they are accessible above ground in remote areas with typically little more than a padlock and a metal fence to keep out someone wanting to damage the line.

Reliant Energy Entex, the natural gas distribution company that serves the Houston area, was notified about the warning but has not added any new security measures as a result, company spokeswoman Alicia Dixon said.

"We've been on a heightened state of alert since Sept. 11 so nothing is different today than it was yesterday," Dixon said. "We have very strong security in place already because of the nature of our business. We have to be prepared to deal with a variety of emergencies."

Dixon said the company received word of the warning from the American Gas Association. The American Petroleum Institute also passed the warning on to energy companies, API spokesman Juan Palomo said.

Enron notified its employees of the warning and also has been on heightened state of alert since Sept. 11, company spokeswoman Gina Taylor said.

"We take all threats seriously," Taylor said.

Enron monitors its pipelines and related facilities such as compression stations using planes, cars and on foot, she said. The company has not added staff to beef up its security as a result of the warning, she said.

"We routinely patrol the right of way," she said.

There are thousands of miles of natural gas pipelines running throughout the nation. Thirty interstate gas pipelines carry 90 percent of the natural gas transported, according to the Interstate Natural Gas Association of America.

Detailed information about locations of pipelines and other energy infrastructure has been taken off some corporate and government Internet sites. Access to facilities has been tightened as well, officials said.

Federal regulators have offered help to pay for the added protection by speeding rate hike requests for beefed-up security.

If a pipeline were attacked with an explosive, for example, the operator could shut off the flow of natural gas, oil or refined products from either side of the break.

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